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## MBA's find the path out of unemployment in babysitting



### VALUE ADDED

Thomas Heath

**W**hen I think of someone with an MBA, I think of a person who is fighting off job recruiters. No unemployment line for today's MBA, right?

Not quite.

Lisa and Ethan Opolion, 37 and 42, a husband-and-wife team armed with master's degrees in business administration, were laid off from their six-figure jobs over the past year. Unemployed and living in Tulsa with two children and a third on the way, they sold their \$325,000 home at a loss.

Instead of complaining, they dug into their retirement savings, borrowed on credit cards and bought the Washington region's rights to a babysitting franchise called SeekingSitters. And just like that, they moved to Rockville.

They aren't rich, but they are off unemployment and have a successful little business that pays for a home and health care for their three kids. Their total compensation is \$100,000, but they hope to increase that amount dramatically as they expand their business.

"We're not sitting here being depressed, thinking woe is me and waiting for something to happen," Lisa said. "We did something for ourselves."

The enterprise is on track to gross up to \$300,000 this year, helped in part by contracts with the Washington Nationals and the Baltimore Ravens.

The unemployed-MBA angle is what sold me on their story, but I also admire their resourcefulness. Take Lisa's relentless pursuit of the Nationals' babysitting contract, which could be a case study of what it takes to close a deal.

"It's all about keeping at it," Lisa said.

She acted on a hunch last December when she jumped online to check out the front-office roster on the Nationals' Web site. She looked for a job

description having to do with child care for players and coaches.

Not finding a contact, she next called the team's switchboard and exchanged several e-mails and phone calls with various Nationals employees. She followed those messages up with letters, SeekingSitters brochures and a corporate DVD explaining the company.

An intern who was screening calls for a decision maker finally called and started talking numbers.

How low could SeekingSitters go on its hourly rate?

Opolion said she needed to visit the stadium's "family room," where the families and children stay during a game while the players and coaches are on the field, before she could provide an estimate.

"At that point, I needed to sell myself as a mom and a business owner," Opolion said.

She and Ethan met with the team's director of community relations for an hour, during which they discussed the needs of the team and why SeekingSitters could do a better job than others.

The Opolions drove their Honda Pilot — "wrapped" in a SeekingSitters logo — to Nationals Park the next day, hand-delivering a proposal and a dozen confections from Georgetown Cupcake "to sweeten the deal."

Two weeks later came the phone call giving them a one-year contract. The money is fine, but the goodwill is better. The Opolions use the Nationals in all their marketing pitches. The contract helped lead to a babysitting deal with the Baltimore Ravens football team and to private babysitting jobs for Nationals players and coaches.

They also have secured business relationships with local Ritz-Carltons and with the Gaylord National Hotel and Convention Center at National Harbor, including babysitting for a recent ball there for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The pair came to know SeekingSitters in Tulsa, where its corporate offices are located. The Opolions lived there while Ethan worked for Hilti, a Liechtenstein-based company

that makes products for the construction industry. Lisa worked from home for FreeCreditReport.com.

Ethan grew up overseas, attending Hebrew University in Jerusalem and earning his MBA at the University of Warwick in England.

Lisa is from Los Angeles, and she studied communications at the University of Colorado.

She eventually attended George Washington University for her MBA, bounced around at some D.C. start-ups and moved back to Los Angeles, where she and Ethan met through an online dating service. They married in 2003.

They moved to Tulsa when he took the job with Hilti, thinking it was a stop on the way to working in Europe. The couple earned about \$225,000 a year and lived in one of the best parts of the city.

But there were rumblings about coming layoffs at Hilti, so they started making plans for their next move. In March 2010, a month before Ethan was laid off from his \$130,000-a-year job, they decided to move to the Washington area and start a babysitting service.

They had explored day care, but the insurance liability dissuaded them.

The Opolions had used SeekingSitters during their three years in Tulsa, spending about \$1,500 a year. SeekingSitters markets itself as a babysitting service that closely vets its sitters through private security background checks.

The company charges \$39.99 to join, and clients pay with a credit card; there is no cash changing hands. The sitters show up in pink T-shirts with age-appropriate toys and games, and the hours are billed to the client's credit card.

The Opolions bought the rights to SeekingSitters for Northern Virginia, Montgomery County and the District for \$100,000. They were drawn to the franchisee because it was a relatively young company, having started in 2004. It started franchising in 2006.

"We wanted to get in the ground floor and help shape the way the business grew," Lisa said. "We have a chance to have input on how it grows. We couldn't do that at a mature

franchise-based company like McDonald's."

The Opolions find their babysitters on college campuses, on online job boards and from other sitters. Each of the company's 40 or so sitters is an independent contractor, so there are no payroll taxes or benefits.

SeekingSitters charges \$16.75 to \$29 an hour. About 5 percent goes to the corporate offices for royalties. The sitters keep about 60 percent of the remainder; the Opolions get the rest.

The service guarantees sitters with a minimum of a seven-day notice, but they often can fulfill babysitting requests made within 24 to 48 hours. Sitters are responsible for their own transportation to and from clients' homes.

At times, while they were building the business, at least one of the Opolions was collecting unemployment. But now they are a real business, paying themselves salaries, buying company cars and hiring part-timers. They even pay for small-business health care out of company revenue.

"I have built a successful business in the last 16 months. We are not planning any trips to Italy," Lisa said. "But we are living off this, making ends meet and my kids go to a good school."

heatht@washpost.com  
Twitter: @addedvalueth

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**Lisa and Ethan Opolion, who have contracts with the Washington Nationals and Baltimore Ravens, are on track to gross \$300,000 this year.**